



**AN EXHIBITION OF
EASTER ISLAND ART
IN PARIS
and
A REVIEW OF THE
ACCOMPANYING
TREASURES OF
EASTER ISLAND**
by Catherine & Michel Orliac

Review by Paul Horley

This Summer was marked by an exceptional commemorative event in Paris — the exhibition of 60 objects from Easter Island in Galerie Louise Leiris, which took place during between June 3 and July 31, 2008. The design of the exhibition hall offered the optimal ambience for contemplating the masterpieces of Rapa Nui woodcarving; large-format photos of *moai* from Rano Raraku and Ahu Tongariki assisted in creation of a special atmosphere for immersion into a fascinating world of Easter Island culture.

The artifacts displayed at the Gallery are exceptional. Thirty-one objects represent the entire Rapa Nui collection of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (SS.CC.); the remaining twenty-nine items include wooden carvings acquired during famous historical visits — a *moai kavakava* obtained by Pierre Loti in 1872, a large *ao* paddle collected during Geiseler/Weisser expedition aboard the *Hyäne* in 1882, and so on.

Upon entering the exhibition hall, visitors are greeted by a group of seven lizard-like carvings — *moai tangata moko*. The next show-case contains a whole constellation of eleven *tahonga* and a wooden skull from the SS.CC. collection, accompanied by feathered headgear (*hau kurakura*) and a set of *mata'a* spearheads. Two large show-cases are dedicated to the classical Rapanui carvings — ten *moai kavakava*, three *moai tangata*, and four *moai pa'a pa'a*, supplemented with a joint double-figure feminine/masculine image. Another unique artifact — an iron cast of *moai kavakava* made in 19th century — is shown side-by-side with the original statuette. All *moai miro* are skillfully arranged to display the most interesting details of their design, such as elaborate head or back carvings, etc. Two *reimiro* pectorals from SS.CC. are shown in individual glass cases.

The exhibition offers a unique opportunity to see three authentic *rongorongo* tablets — *Tahua*, *Aruku Kurenga*, and *Mamari*, displayed in cases equipped with a special anti-reflective glass coating, allowing a clear view of both inscribed sides of each artefact. Further on, eight dance paddles (*rapa*) form a dynamic composition, evoking a rhythm of a dance itself. Finally, visitors can contemplate wooden carvings used as chief's insignia of power: two large double-bladed *ao* paddles, four massive *ua* staves, and a short *paoa* club.

Since its opening, the exhibition has attracted significant attention in the media and a large number of visitors. Moreover, the gallery has a special day dedicated exclusively to excursions of school children superbly guided by the gallery's director, Quentin Laurens. Explaining the peculiarities of Rapa Nui culture, he encourages the children to participate in creative dialogues, helping them to gain a better perception and understanding of the artefacts they see. At the end of the visit, the kids are given a unique opportunity to make drawings of the objects so they can focus on fine-detail study of a particular carving. Before leaving, each child is presented with an exclusively-designed T-shirt featuring a glyph carved on the head of one of the exhibited *moai kavakava* (but not a single word associated with Easter Island; in this way, each participant will need to recall the things that he or she heard at the exhibition to explain the meaning of this design to family and friends). In my point of view, such excursions are extremely essential: They kindle interest and inspire imagination, so that in the future some of these children will decide to dedicate their efforts to research and preservation of a fragile cultural heritage created by the previous generations.

The exhibition is tied to a special event — publication of a monumental bi-lingual volume, *Trésors de l'Île de Pâques / Treasures of Easter Island*, written by Catherine and Michel Orliac and translated into English by Paul Bahn.* The book focuses on the objects belonging to the collection of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts and is richly illustrated with over 200 photos, drawings, and maps. The reader will find here portraits of the missionaries who were working on the island, such as Eugène Eyraud, Gaspar Zumbohm, Théodule Escolan, as well as the Missionary Superior, Bishop Tepano Jaussen from Tahiti. The book includes three historical maps dating back to 1870s, one of which is unique — it is the first document recording no fewer than 74 Rapa Nui place names.

Numerous illustrations made by early visitors include drawings by Pierre Loti and three watercolors from the HMS *Topaze* expedition (1868), depicting the two-headed female statue from Vinapu — an image with a similar composition but slightly different details as compared with the drawing published by Heyerdahl (1961:73, Fig. 8); the second picture renders the interior of a crypt constructed under the toppled colossi of Ahu Vinapu I, as seen from the northern corner of the structure, supplementing Palmer's aquarelle that shows the crypt from its southern side (Van Tilburg 1994:53, Fig. 35); and the third watercolor illustrates transportation of *moai* Hoa Haka Nana I'a down the slopes of Rano Kau, supine and on a sledge.

Treasures of Easter Island presents an outstanding documentation of the artefacts belonging to the SS.CC. collection with numerous high-detail color photos showing the objects from multiple angles, including breathtaking full-page close-up images; at the same time, many archival images taken in 19th century are also included, allowing the reader to see the original state of the artefacts upon their collection.

The book consists of four chapters. The first presents general facts about Easter Island — geography, nature, history,

culture, and its position in the larger Polynesian family. This expanded introduction supplies the reader with all the necessary information for understanding the main types of Easter Island art and its evolution and role in the society. Special attention is paid to the discussion about the island's environment, including the recent research results concerning the original Rapa Nui flora. The latter appeared to be diverse and abundant, offering the ancient carvers a large variety of wood. Fruits of the extinct pink apple tree (*Eugenia malaccensis*) and a palm (*Paschalococos dispersa*) also contributed to the diet of the islanders.

The second chapter narrates the establishment of the SS.CC. mission on the island, telling the history of the settlement, observations of the missionaries, collection of artefacts, and the search for inscribed *kohau rongorongo* tablets, as well as describing a conflict with Captain Dutrou Bornier and the calling of three ships: HMS *Topaze* (1868), *Glitner* (1869), and *O'Higgins* (1870).

The third chapter of the book emphasizes the detailed documentation and analysis of the artefacts belonging to the collections of SS.CC. Each type of carving is considered in a separate sub-section, prefaced with an extensive introduction mentioning similar objects from other collections, followed by discussions on morphology, stylistic variations, and the evolution of wood carvings in general and designs adorning them in particular. The possible use of the objects in everyday life is explained based on the scrupulous analysis of early ethnographic accounts, complemented by thorough studies of wear patterns and repairs of the original artefacts. Indeed, due to a scarcity of wood in the late period of island history, it became more practical to fix damaged items than to procure material for carving new ones. The reader will be surprised to learn how many artefacts feature the traces of such repairs, and how masterfully they were done by carefully matching the implants to the original wood in both color and texture. The repairs of the objects from the SS.CC. collection are illustrated by revealing X-ray images.

Another novel approach concerns the detailed analysis of wood fiber patterns, which allowed the authors to determine the "position" of the object inside the tree trunk for two *moai kavakava*, two *rapa* paddles, eleven *tahonga*, and a carved skull pendant, and also for a large (80 cm / 31.5") *reimiro* pectoral. This information is of extreme importance for further research aimed at reconstructing the size of individual trees that were once part of the island's forests.

The book devotes a special attention to *rongorongo* artefacts. Initially, the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts had the largest collection of these objects, including six tablets: *Tahua*, *Aruku Kurenga*, *Mamari*, *Echancrée*, *Keiti*, and (what

became later referred to as) the Stephen-Chauvet fragment. All of these artefacts are illustrated with historical pictures from the late 19th to early 20th centuries; the objects currently belonging to the SS.CC. collection (*Tahua*, *Aruku Kurenga*, and *Mamari*) are additionally documented by modern color images, showing details of both sides of each tablet.

The fourth chapter of the book analyses the wood used by the ancient carvers, aiming to reveal the connections between the material and carved images. The discussion is based on immense research work carried out by Catherine and Michel Orliac, the main results of which were presented at the VII International Conference on Easter Island and the Pacific in Gotland (Orliac 2008, *in press*). In particular, it was shown that the famous *toromiro* wood, which allows good surface polishing and becomes dark-red upon aging, was the material of choice for the statuettes of *moai kavakava* and *moai tangata* whereas the fine-grained *mako* wood was more preferred for *tahonga*, *reimiro*, and *rongorongo* tablets.

An additional 70-page exhibition catalogue was published to supplement the main book, illustrating 29 objects that do not belong to the SS.CC. collection. Each object is briefly described with dimensions, materials used, collection date, and the existence of previous publications. The last pages of the catalogue contain the general gallery of all 60 artefacts displayed. A special collector's "boxed edition" including both books is also available. These beautifully illustrated volumes, containing much important information about wood carvings of Easter Island, are undoubtedly a "must have" for the library of every Rapanuiphile.

REFERENCES

- Heyerdahl, T. & E.N. Ferdon Jr. (eds.). 1961. *Reports of the Norwegian Archaeology to Easter Island and the East Pacific, Vol. 1: Archaeology of Easter Island*. Santa Fe: Monographs of the School of American Research and Museum of New Mexico (No. 24, Part 1).
- Orliac C. 2008. Botanical Identification of 200 Easter Island Wood Carvings in *The Gotland Papers: Proceedings of the VII International Conference on Easter Island and the Pacific* (S. McLaughlin, ed.) - Los Osos: Easter Island Foundation. (*in press*)
- Van Tilburg, J.A. 1994. *Easter Island: Archaeology, Ecology and Culture*. London: British Museum Press.

* The 288-page, hardbound, bi-lingual book (ISBN 978-3-952256-74-9) is 31×26.5 cm (12.2×10.4") in dimensions, weighs approximately 2 kg (4.4 lb.), and is published by Éditions D - Frédéric Dawance (Geneva) & Éditions Louise Leiris (Paris). It's available at present either directly from the Galerie Louise Leiris (they do not process phone, fax, or online orders) or via www.amazon.fr for € 61.75 (\$97.85). The book will be available from commercial booksellers by the end of the year.

“

Mania for the colossal.

— Alfred Métraux

”